

Latex Allergy

Since 1990, latex allergies have become a serious health care problem. This may be due to the increased use of latex gloves. Health care workers and others use these gloves to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B and other infectious diseases. But those who have had frequent medical procedures or whose work puts them in frequent, direct contact with latex are at greatest risk. But, anyone can have a latex allergy.

What is latex?

Latex is natural rubber that is made from the sap of the Brazilian rubber tree. Hundreds of products may contain latex:

- medical devices (gloves, blood pressure cuffs, IV tubes and catheters);
- dental items (dams and orthodontic rubber bands);
- clothing (the elastic waistbands in pants and underwear);
- children's items (bottle nipples, pacifiers, teething toys and toys);
- household items (rugs, bathmats and rubber gloves);
- personal care items (diaphragms and condoms);
- office and school supplies (rubber bands, erasers, rubber cement and paint).

Not all brands of all items contain latex. Check labels carefully or contact the manufacturer if you are allergic to latex.

What is latex allergy?

A latex allergy is a reaction to a protein in the sap of the rubber tree. If someone who is sensitive touches or breathes the protein, he or she can have an allergic reaction.

Some of the other chemicals used in making latex gloves can cause serious allergies, as well. Also, latex gloves are dusted with powder to make them easier to put on and take off. When this powder combines with the latex protein, it can get into the air when the gloves are used and be inhaled.

Who is at greatest risk for latex allergy?

People at greatest risk include:

- people with allergies who may have cross reactions (see below);
- children with spina bifida or multiple surgeries;
- health care workers and housekeeping staff in health facilities;
- people who require frequent medical procedures, such as catheterization;
- child care providers;
- food service workers;
- workers in tire factories and rubber manufacturing; and
- others who must wear latex gloves at work.

What are the symptoms of latex allergy?

Some of the symptoms of a latex allergy are:

- skin rash or itching (usually on the hands);
- hives;
- swollen, red skin;
- swollen lips and tongue, with difficulty breathing;
- shortness of breath, wheezing;
- dizziness;
- fainting;
- stomach pain;
- diarrhea;
- shock (rare, except in people who have chronic allergic reactions to latex products).

What can I do if I think I have latex allergy?

If you have these symptoms, do not use latex gloves or other latex products. See a doctor who is experienced in diagnosing and treating latex allergy. If you must wear gloves, use nonlatex gloves.

How can I reduce my risk of latex allergy?

Only people who may be exposed to body fluids, like health care workers, need to use latex gloves. Other materials, such as vinyl, will usually provide adequate protection for house cleaning, food service and restaurant workers, day care workers and others.

If you must use latex gloves, use powder-free gloves to reduce the amount of latex protein that can get into the air.

What should I do if I am allergic to latex?

- Learn all you can about latex allergies.
- If possible, avoid contact with latex products.
- If you have to wear gloves at work, ask your employer for nonlatex gloves.
- Ask your health care provider if you should carry an emergency epinephrine kit.
- Wear a personal medical ID bracelet with information about your allergy.
- Before any dental or medical procedures, tell your health care provider about your allergy. Ask to be the first patient in the morning to try to avoid latex protein in the air.
- Inform your local emergency responders (police, fire and ambulance service) about your condition.
- If your child has a latex allergy, you should also tell school officials or day care providers.

What is a cross reaction?

People who have a latex allergy may be allergic to some foods, as well. This is called a cross reaction. When this happens, your body responds with the same allergic symptoms that you would have if you

were exposed to latex. Cross reactions differ from one person to another. Someone may have a reaction to all the foods noted to cause cross reaction while another may have no reaction at all. Likewise, if you are allergic to any of these foods, you may also be allergic to latex:

- apples, bananas, kiwi, peaches, plums, figs, grapes, melons, papaya, passion fruit, cherries, nectarines, pears, pineapple and strawberries;
- carrots, celery, raw potatoes, avocados and tomatoes;
- chestnuts and hazelnuts;
- wheat and rye.

If you are allergic to any of these foods, tell your doctor before having any medical procedure. You could have a cross reaction to latex.

For more information, contact:

- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Hubert H. Humphrey Bldg., 200 Independence Ave., Room 715H, Washington, DC 20201, 1-800-356-4674
<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh>
- New York State Department of Health (DOH), Corning Tower, Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY 12237
<http://www.health.state.ny.us>
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) U.S. Department of Labor, 200 Constitution Ave., Washington, DC 20210
<http://www.osha.gov>
- American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, 85 West Algonquin Road, Suite 550, Arlington Heights, IL 60005
<http://www.allergy.mcg.edu>
- Spina Bifida Association of America, 4590 MacArthur Blvd., Suite 250, Washington, DC 20007-4226, 1-800-621-3141
<http://www.sbaa.org>
- University of Wisconsin
http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/lib_latx.htm